

ETHNOGRAPHY OF MIGRATION: BREAKING OUT OF THE BI-POLAR MYTH

by Douglas Uzzell

Most studies of movements of people among rural and urban places have employed what I shall call a "bi-polar" conceptualization of the space in which activities related to such movements take place. Mitchell's provocative discussion (1966) of studies of migration in southern Africa is a case in point. Mitchell pictures migrants as essentially bi-cultural travelers from a village to a city and back, with no significant activities elsewhere. Likewise, the "pulls" and "pushes" of which economists speak are typically described as existing in a class of urban places and in a class of rural places respectively, with the social and economic activities of migrants being located in one or the other.

The proliferation of terms in the literature on migration reflects this conceptualization. Thus, one reads of rural-urban, urban-urban, rural-rural, and most recently urban-rural migration, and of permanent, temporary, seasonal, and return migration. The image resembles a railway line with urban and rural stops. If the traveler has a one-way ticket, the migration is either permanent or a return to his original home. If he has a round-trip ticket, it is temporary. If he has an excursion package or a long-term pass, the migration is seasonal (or else seasonal migration is a special class of temporary migration).

Such a conceptualization of the space within which people move is, I believe, an artifact of the ways in which migrants have been studied (or conversely). And it is an unfortunate one, because, according to information I have been able to obtain in Mexico,¹ it is a distortion of the experiences of many of the migrants themselves. As such, it masks the mechanisms by which large-scale economic, political, and other cultural causes are translated into effects at the level of the individual actor.

Most studies of migrants have focused upon populations present at a given urban place at a particular time. That practice creates one pole of the bi-polar concept. The concern of anthropologists and sociologists has most frequently been directed to adaptation of the newly urban popula-

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tions to the new milieu, implying an acculturative process, which in turn implies the culture or subculture of the migrants' places of origin—whence the other pole of the concept. Surveys of migrants in cities, eliciting "reasons for migration," give us lists of labels such as "education" or "employment," leaving us to speculate about the many possible meanings of the labels, and inviting us to assume that somehow the antonyms of the labels, for example, "no education" or "unemployment," characterize the populations remaining at the point of origin, and that those who remained behind either used up all the available employment and education, or were willing to settle for less.

The very term *migration*, evoking as it does lemmings and geese, takes our minds off what individual people do, gives us license to fish for data with seines, makes of us museum keepers of traits, tabulators, not ethnographers, pursuers of the holy hard number. And the fits and starts, the make-do and piecemeal, of individual lives do not so much elude us as continue uninterrupted on a plane not within our focus.

If you live in San Andres Zautla in the Oaxaca Valley of Mexico, chances are your economic life, and much of your social life, is lived in many places besides the village. And if in the course of your life you choose to make your life's residential center outside the village, chances are the meaning to you is nothing more than a shift of emphasis, a gravitational adjustment. That is certainly true if you remain in the Etla arm of the Valley. It may even be true if you move to Mexico City.

Zautla is a village eight kilometers west of Etla, the district headquarters. Etla, in turn, is about fifteen kilometers northwest of Oaxaca on the Pan American highway. There are seven small grocery stores in Zautla, but most major sales and purchases of the villagers take place either at the Wednesday market in Etla or at the Saturday market in Oaxaca. In addition to its Wednesday market, Etla has a number of permanent retail outlets. Oaxaca is, of course, a major provincial city. Its weekly market provides only an intensification of daily commercial activities, an intensification wrought largely by the weekly arrival of hundreds of residents of villages such as Zautla.

It is hard to make a living farming in Zautla, but almost everybody farms. You plant your maize and beans and you hope. Then you look for additional work. For some, farming provides only a supplementary income. With a population of just over a thousand, Zautla has six bakers, four butchers, and five brick masons. Because most people eat homemade tortillas most of the time, one baker probably could meet the sparse local demand for bread. Thus the bakers must sell in a number of neighboring villages, some making special trips to distant villages when

those villages have large celebrations, others selling at the weekly markets in Etla and Oaxaca. Because meat is a luxury and its consumption mostly limited to special occasions, all the butchers sell outside the village. The number of full-time butchers has grown since the arrival (about 1970) of electricity and the subsequent use of refrigerators. Now members of the butchers' families make daily bus trips to Oaxaca, taking thirty or so kilograms of meat each trip, and selling both to retailers and to wholesalers in the city. With seldom more than one house under construction in the village at a time (and more often none), the five full-time brick masons seek work all over the district. In addition to them, there are others who possess skills in brick masonry and who work outside the village seasonally or when the opportunity presents itself.

All fifteen full-time specialists (who comprise about five percent of the economically active villagers) and their part-time counterparts must, for economic reasons, maintain social relationships outside the village. Thus begins the pattern of multi-local relationships and the actions by which they are maintained that I feel casts doubt on the validity of the bi-polar conceptualization of the space in which migration occurs.

There are other specialists, and many other kinds of relationships. Two villagers are full-time cheese makers. Daily, they collect milk, not only from Zautecos, but also from residents of other villages. However, their suppliers do not make up the total population of milk suppliers in Zautla. Cheese makers from neighboring villages also have regular suppliers in Zautla, from whom they make daily collections at the same time the Zautla cheese makers are collecting milk from residents of their own villages. The cheese is retailed in Zautla and in other villages, and is also sold in bulk to cheese makers who sell in Etla and Oaxaca. In two villages, neither more than five kilometers from Zautla, there are multi-family organizations that have permanent booths in the Oaxaca market, where they sell cheese. According to a census undertaken by the villagers in the summer of 1975, sixteen percent of the active work force were then supplying milk to various cheese makers; and that figure represents less production than usual, because several dry years had reduced the amount of alfalfa available for milk cows.

In 1975, there was only one carpenter in Zautla, and there has not been a blacksmith in recent years. Two carpenters (brothers) who previously lived in the village have emigrated, one to Sonora and one to Mexico City. The remaining carpenter specializes in the manufacture of furniture, which he sells outside, as well as within, the village. The house carpenter, who used to be the major specialist of his kind employed in Zautla until his death two years ago, was a Mixtec who lived a six-hour walk from Zautla. A blacksmith lives in a village about one kilometer from Zautla. He and his sons repair metal tools and manufacture grill-

work gates, doors, and window guards in their home or journey to other villages for work that must be done on the site.

Zautla exports school teachers. At least fifteen people now teaching are natives of the village. Three live in Zautla and teach in the local school. Four others live in the village but teach elsewhere. The remaining four teachers in the Zautla school live outside the village and commute. An additional eight teachers born in Zautla have migrated either to nearby villages or to Mexico City.

Since 1935, Zautla has been the home of La Banda de San Andres Zautal, or more popularly, Los Zautecos. The band (which had fourteen members in 1975) plays an average of one engagement per month, most commonly at the festivals honoring the patron saints of local villages. Village saints' festivals are usually four-day affairs, at which musicians are provided room and board in addition to their fees.

In a sense, Zautla seems to be an important health care center for the district. Although its major general practice *curandero*, whose home was referred to as "the hospital" by residents of surrounding villages, and whose fame attracted M.D.'s from as far away as Mexico City to study his techniques, has not been replaced since his death ten years ago, there are a number of villagers who specialize in curing infirmities ranging from *susto* (fright sickness) to arthritis. In addition an M.D. from the village, who now lives in Oaxaca, returns to Zautla on weekends to treat local people. One *huesero* (bone specialist) in Zautla told me in 1975 that he treats about eight to fifteen patients per month, the majority of them being from other villages and many requiring house calls.

A question requiring further research is the extent to which residents of any given village prefer curers in villages other than their own. The tinge of witchcraft associated with curing and the tendency to attribute the status of witch to those who are most distant (see Selby, 1974), together with my own casual observations of outsiders coming to the village for treatment, lead me to expect this to be the case.

One could multiply almost endlessly the examples of the economic activities of villagers that occur outside the village. Virtually every adult in the village must travel weekly or more often to Etla or to Oaxaca to buy supplies. Most able-bodied adult males find work at one time or another on road and highway improvement projects and on haciendas within commuting distance of the village, and also take temporary agricultural employment as far away as Vera Cruz, Chiapas, or even the United States.

But it is not the dispersion of the economic activities of villagers that makes the bi-polar conceptualization of migration inappropriate. Rather, it is the spatially dispersed societal structure in which the activities take place and also the array of available economic strategies that make the

decision to change residence only one aspect of a class of choices that most villagers must make annually or more often.

The various artisans and other producers who depend upon non-Zautecos to hire, buy from, or supply them do not act impersonally in their dealings. Generally, each minute economic exchange follows a network of dyadic relationships. The cheese makers make a good case in point. Clearly, the most efficient manner in which to collect the daily production of milk would be for cheese makers in each village to collect milk only in that village. This does not occur, however. Some people in Zautla sell their milk to cheese makers outside the village, while cheese makers in Zautla obtain some of their milk from residents of other villages. The increased cost of transportation is obvious, but the reason for it is that special relationships exist between cheese maker and milk producer, and those relationships take precedence over efficiency. Again, in the case of artisans, nobody advertises his skills through an impersonal medium such as a newspaper or the radio. Rather, when one needs the services of a particular kind of artisan, he uses one either with whom he has a special relationship or with whom a member of his personal network has a special relationship.

Maintaining such relationships, then, becomes an economic necessity. What happens is that despite continuous inter-village feuding, accompanied by a complex of mechanisms for maintaining village boundaries (see Dennis, 1973), as well as sub-cultural differences between peasant and townsman, there is practically no Zauteco who cannot go to virtually any village in the Etla arm of the Valley, or to Etla or Oaxaca, and find a person with whom he or she can claim a special relationship. Thus the social cosmos of the villager is not bounded by the village as the bi-polar myth would lead us to believe. Instead, it is at least regional in scope—and perhaps larger.

That situation is reinforced by the effects of migration, which has been occurring in significant numbers since at least the early 1940s. All Zautla families have members who are now living in Oaxaca, Mexico City, or some other urban place. Many have members who now live in neighboring villages. A case in point is a family to whom I shall assign the fictitious name of Garcia. The patriarch of the family, an agriculturalist and a plumber, who worked his way up what remains of the *cargo* system² of the village to the position of president, now lives with his second wife (the first having died) in a *colonia* in the suburbs of Mexico City. His daughter lives in Oaxaca, although she continues to own land in Zautla. One of his sons lives in Zautla. Another son lives in a nearby village, where he works as an automotive mechanic. The wife of the Zautla Garcia is a native Zauteco, but her brother is a radio repairman in Mexico City. The brother has been responsible for training the Zautla Garcia's

two sons in radio repair, and now one of them works in Etlá and the other in Oaxaca.

When any member of the García family is confronted with an economic problem, the entire range of family contacts (and residences) is counted into his or her available options, and in fact the choice is most likely dictated by the family, operating corporately.

Such cases are quite common. A landless family member is encouraged to seek work in Mexico City with the aid of a cousin who has contacts in the construction industry (see Lomnitz, 1974; Butterworth, 1962). An affinal or consanguineal kinsman in the village dies, leaving him land, and he returns. A young woman is widowed in the village and has no adult children to support her. A job as domestic servant is found for her by a kinsman in Oaxaca. Later, her father dies, leaving a small grocery store in the village, so she returns to Zautla and remains until her son, with a secondary-school education and working in Mexico City, reaches a degree of financial success and sends for her to join him. Several brothers from the village open a grocery store in Oaxaca. One brother remains in Zautla to operate a store there and raise corn and beans, which are sold at the store in Oaxaca.

This pattern is perhaps most visible in the case of teen-aged children who must leave the village to attend secondary school. Only a few villagers are wealthy enough to provide separate maintenance for their children in the city while they attend school. Instead, the students are sent to live with kinsmen. Once the student has received secondary or higher education, he or she must seek employment in a place where his or her skills have value, or else, if adequate land is available in the village, return there to farm it. The majority of people with secondary or higher education probably remain in a city simply because their educations give them no economic advantage in the village. But some seek employment near Zautla so that they can supplement their incomes by farming. School teachers, who earn very little, and who *can* find work in the villages (and whose vacation coincides with the growing season), seem especially likely to follow such a course.

The picture that has been presented so far shows a multi-local mapping of a social system. Families are distributed over a number of localities of various sizes. Also, non-kinship relationships are created and maintained in a number of locations for and by villagers with wide-ranging economic activities. Let us now return to the individual Zauteco, who must, within that context, decide from year to year what he will do in order to make a living.

A point that must always be kept in mind is that very few villagers can subsist on the proceeds of farming alone. Despite the fact that virtually all economically active villagers are engaged in agriculture, the village im-

ports a sizable portion of its staples, including corn and beans, which are its two chief crops. Not only do most villagers not have enough good land to support their families, but far more of them lack the capital to maximize the productivity of the land they do have. Ironically, the majority of irrigation wells and pumps in the village are owned by people for whom agriculture provides only supplemental income. In fact, one of the most active irrigators no longer lives in the village, but in Oaxaca, where he sells clothing.

The result is that most economically active people must plan ways of securing additional income. Except for those with more or less constant non-agricultural income, such as the butchers, the bakers, the teachers, and a few others, the possibilities for supplemental income vary from year to year, depending upon the presence or absence of road projects, labor demands of neighboring hacienda owners, and other variables. The typical breadwinner in Zautla must sit down at least once a year and assess his resources and prospects. In so doing, he not only considers an array of possible kinds of employment, but also counts on a personal network of people dispersed among villages in the district and in various cities in Mexico and elsewhere, who may give him the information, the temporary shelter, or the influence he needs to eke out his living for that year. Employment histories with which I am familiar indicate that most frequently a given individual's strategies vary from year to year, depending upon fortuitous development of jobs nearby, upon the particularly fortunate placement of a friend or kinsman, or upon the decision to experiment with strategies of which he has learned from other people.

Thus, a typical Zauteco might decide one year to join a group of villagers who annually go to Chiapas to work in the cotton harvest. The next year, having found that work too hard and unremunerative for his taste or his requirements, he may join another group who go to Vera Cruz to cut cane. The following year, finding that a milk cow he owns has reached maturity and is especially productive, he may decide that the income from the milk will see him through the year. Accordingly, he will remain in the village, perhaps increasing the land he cultivates by renting communal land,³ and renting an irrigated plot for growing alfalfa for the cow. Possibly, he will use that year at home to repair his house, and he may decide while he is there to enhance his social position in the village by tilling church land as a member of the *cofradia*. In another year, having special information from a fictive kinsman that there is to be a state road project nearby, he may gamble on gaining employment there and again remain in the village, reducing the land under cultivation to an amount he can take care of in the reduced time he expects to have available. In yet another year, finding that a cousin has been made foreman of a labor gang on a construction project in Mexico City and can hire

him for a few months, our Zauteco may make that employment the cornerstone of that year's livelihood. Meanwhile, he picks up money as he can, selling tortillas at the Oaxaca market this week, working three days on a house under construction in a nearby village the next. At the same time, he must maintain the social ties upon which he depends. He does that by spending a weekend with an adult offspring in Oaxaca, attending a birthday party of a commercial associate in a nearby village, or giving a festival himself on a special occasion and inviting, in addition to his kinsmen and local friends, his far-flung acquaintances as well.

CONCLUSION

My argument, that villagers do not see the area in which their lives are acted out as polarized between village and city, rests on two main points. First, be he artisan or general factotum, the modal villager depends for livelihood upon the maintenance of a social network that spans many neighboring villages and one or more cities. Second, as a member of a family that deals corporately with the economic exigencies of its members, and that, because of previous migration, has outposts in many places, both rural and urban, he or she must continually be prepared to consider moving from one place to another to capitalize on windfalls or meet family needs.

It is not always necessary, or even desirable, to develop analytical models that correspond to folk views of the world. But here I think the need does exist, because the shift of viewpoint I suggest would change much of what we think about the significance and mechanisms of deciding to migrate and about the acculturative process of adapting to life in the city. Finally, the non-polar point of view should call into question the usefulness of categories such as rural-urban, rural-rural, urban-rural, and urban-urban as they are applied to migration.

Instead of such categories, I would like to see a paradigm that classifies patterns of life histories, including various kinds of socioeconomic choices. With such a paradigm, we might begin to be able to ascertain the processes by which occurrences of national or regional scope affect individual decisions.

FUTURE TRENDS

It may be argued that the village I chose for study is not typical and that formulations made from data gathered there are thus not generalizable. While it is true that Zautla probably began producing large numbers of migrants earlier than neighboring villages and that residents stopped speaking Zapotec as a first language earlier than most of their neighbors, I do not think that disqualifies it. On the one hand, it seems

likely that the pattern of interdependence of villages based on occupational specialization and articulated by dyadic relationships is an old one. On the other hand, urbanization seems to have proceeded in ways that appear typical, so that the situation in Zautla now may foreshadow similar developments in other villages. It may be argued that urbanization itself is destructive to the bi-polar myth.

I have preliminary data indicating that further urbanization, while increasing the scope of the activities of villagers, will diminish the need for maintaining the supporting social network. If this turns out to be the case, it will indicate a change of world view of the villagers, but not a change toward spatial polarization.

NOTES

1. Research upon which this paper is based was carried out in the summers of 1968 and 1975. The earlier research was financed by a grant from the National Science Foundation, the latter was funded by Rice University.

2. A *cargo* system is a hierarchy of civil and religious offices that male villagers hold. Generally, each higher office is more costly to the holder, and gives him more prestige, than the office below it. In traditional villages, *cargo* systems are elaborate and consume a great deal of surplus capital. In Zautla, however, there are only vestiges of the religious part of the *cargo* system, and individuals gain prestige from holding civil offices, which are not as costly as some of the old religious offices.

3. Although a virtually unlimited amount of communal land is available to anyone who pays a nominal fee, tilling it is risky. Cost of seed, fertilizer, and cultivation is likely not to be repaid by the harvest.

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